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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000188

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SUBJECT: WHY NOW FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS REFERENDUM?

REF: BAKU 16

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: The GOAJ's announcement to hold a referendum on changing the constitution to remove, inter alia, the two-term limit on the presidency was rushed through parliament just two months after President Ilham Aliyev overwhelmingly won a second five year term in office. The speed of this decision may indicate that Aliyev feels insecure in his control over the country, and worries about questions of succession. Political commentators attribute this insecurity to either fighting between internal factions, possibly supported by economic interests and/or activities of Azerbaijan's neighbors, or even external economic problems. Multiple factors are probably at play, including the current weakness and disorganization of the opposition, in the decision to hold the referendum March 18, which will very likely result in Aliyev's continued dominance of Azerbaijan's politics. End Summary.

12. (C) The GOAJ announced its plan to hold a referendum to make 29 amendments to the Constitution, including the removal of the two term limit on the president (reftel), just two months after Ilham Aliyev won his second term as president by an overwhelming 88 percent of the vote. This cable addresses the possible reasons for the haste in holding this referendum, given the seeming popularity of the current regime and the apparent absence of immediate threats to power.

Internal Factors

13. (C) Fariz Isamayilzade, a largely pro-government political pundit currently working for the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, believes that the referendum is being held now due to President Aliyev's worry about being perceived as a lame duck president. He believes that as soon as Aliyev began his second term, powerful figures both inside the country and in Russia and Iran began to look for ways to identify and support an individual who might become the next president. Therefore, Aliyev had to change the Constitution in order to preserve political stability in the country. Ismayilzade went as far as to say that without this referendum, Aliyev may not have been able to serve his full five-year second term, as some other power broker may have unseated him.

14. (C) Rasim Musabayov, another well-known independent political commentator, also argues that internal power struggles were the motivation for holding the referendum quickly. He believes it is a signal from conservative

elements of the government to supporters of first lady Mehriban Aliyeva that Ilham Aliyev does not intend to turn power over to her in 2013. (Note: the first lady comes from the Pashayev family, which has traditionally been one of the most powerful in the country. Hafiz Pashayev, Azerbaijan's first Ambassador to the United States, is Mehriban's uncle. End Note.) Musabayov also believed that this referendum had to happen urgently, or Mehriban's supporters, who fall outside the Aliyevs' Nakhchivan clan, would begin undermining Aliyev's rule.

15. (C) Eldeniz Elgun, a former pro-government television journalist who now writes for opposition newspapers, also cites internal power struggles as the main reason for the referendum, explaining that there are actually several factions fighting for future control of the government and its associated financial benefits. According to Elgun, the three major factions are headed respectively by Ramiz Mehdiyev (head of the Presidential Apparatus), Kemaladdin Heydarov (Minister of Emergency Situations), and Mehriban Aliyeva "with the support of Eldar Mahmudov" (Minister of National Security). Similar to Musabayov, Elgun believes that First Lady Mehriban has the support of the more progressive, Russian-speaking elites from the Baku and Shirvan areas, where the Pashayev family has traditionally had strong backing. Mehdiyev, by contrast, represents the more conservative element from the western enclave of Nakhchivan, where the Aliyev family originates. Elgun believes Mehriban's faction had been gaining influence recently, and this referendum is an attempt to stifle this.

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16. (C) Human rights defender Leyla Yunus, who is coordinating opposition efforts to defeat the constitutional changes, also strongly suggested that internal factors, namely economic rivalry and clan operations, stand behind the hasty referendum. Yunus, in a frank conversation with Emboffs, noted that Ilham Aliyev, who had a reputation as somewhat of a "playboy" before coming to power, has failed to develop as firm a grip on power as his father had had. The elder Heydar Aliyev, who passed away in 2003, a Soviet-era Central Committee First Secretary and the highest ranking Muslim in the Politburo, understood power dynamics in the post-Soviet sphere. Ilham, however, who hails from a different generation, has not been able to maintain such a definitive hold over Azerbaijan various factions. Aliyev himself reportedly has complained privately to western interlocutors that he is running a government that is like a western European coalition government -- but without the benefit of a coalition agreement.

External Factors

17. (C) Leyla Aliyeva, another well-known political pundit, stated that external economic factors were the major reason to rush the referendum. The worldwide economic crisis, the fall in the price of oil, and Azerbaijan's falling oil output combine to create an uncertain political future and thus opportunities for the President's rivals. The referendum, then, is a way for Aliyev to capitalize on his decisive October victory and strengthen his position against all comers as the situation becomes more fluid.

Comment

18. (C) Despite Aliyev's overwhelming victory in the October 2008 presidential election, the quick organization of a referendum to lock in his position clearly indicates that he is insecure about maintaining control over the country, and possibly his seat, as a lame duck. Azerbaijan's influx of oil wealth has intensified Azerbaijan's traditionally tough internal politics, which increasingly coalesce around economic as well as clan interests and give rise to alternate

centers of power. It is probable that Aliyev's sense of insecurity stems from a lack of control over both internal political factions and external economic factors. In this environment, it makes sense that Aliyev would take advantage of a strong popular mandate to enact a speedy change to the constitution to ensure his continued dominance. In addition, the current weakness of opposition parties in Azerbaijan ensures that passage of the referendum is not a gamble for Aliyev.

DERSE